

Styles of Organization of the White House Office

Directions: Read the selection, and answer the questions.

No hard or fast rules govern the way presidents shape their staffs; the only variables are their preferences and work habits. At the same time, certain patterns of organization have recurred over the years, leading scholars to discern two types of patterns: pyramidal and circular.

As the name suggests, pyramidal staffs are structured as a hierarchy with the president occupying the top position. Immediately under the president is usually a chief of staff, who has a few key assistants who are close to the president; some may have direct access to the Oval Office. Arranged in order of importance below these close aides are the other assistants, increasing in number as their relative importance decreases.

This structure is designed to ensure a clear chain of command and provide precise channels of communication for information going up and directives coming down. It permits specialization at the lower levels and control at the top. In theory, those higher up in the system are able to provide the president with more accurate information in a timely manner while filtering out and eliminating unnecessary information. President Dwight D. Eisenhower argued that "a president who doesn't know how to decentralize will be weighted down with details and won't have time to deal with the big issues."¹ A pyramidal staff arrangement provides this decentralization.

Critics of the pyramidal staff have contended that the structure may distort information and problems. Highly complex problems may resist compression into the one-page memoranda preferred by Presidents Eisenhower and Ronald Reagan; information and policy alternatives that the president should have may be lost or discarded at the lower staff levels.

A staff pyramid also may malfunction and isolate the president. By acting as a screen, the staff may keep from the president not only unnecessary but also just unpleasant information. What staff member wants to be the bearer of bad news? Critics charge that pyramidal staffs can cause the president to lose contact with reality. Indeed, it may happen that the staff is controlling the president more than the president is controlling the staff.

In the circular, or "spokes of the wheel," method of organizing the White House, the president also acts as chief of staff. Surrounded by a number of trusted advisers, all of whom have approximately equal access to the Oval Office, the president makes assignments, receives reports, and largely determines how presidential time is allotted among staffers. Essentially, the president sits in the middle of a ring of advisers who funnel information to and are in equal contact with the Oval Office, much like the hub of a wheel.

The circular approach to staff organization permits the president to obtain information from a variety of sources. Properly pursued, this approach reduces the possibility that dissenting voices are lost in the shuffle and never reach the president. Because not all details are worked out at the lower staff levels, the president can have more input in the specifics of the administration's policies, thereby ensuring that an important idea is not lost in the evolution of a brief

¹Patrick Anderson, *The President's Men: White House Assistants of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Lyndon B. Johnson* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968), 135.

policy memo. As some scholars have noted, activist presidents who want an exchange of ideas at the higher levels have tended to prefer this approach.

The circular staff arrangement may permit too much access to the president, however. Given the size of the modern White House staff, a president who does not have someone else to control the flow of people and paper to the Oval Office is at serious risk of being inundated and swept away. There is simply not enough of the president to go around. H. R. Haldeman once observed that "if everyone who wanted to see (the president) got in, nobody would get in because there wouldn't be room."² And, as President Gerald Ford noted, "Because power in Washington is measured by how much access a person has to the president, almost everyone wanted more access than I had access to give. I wanted to have an 'open' door, but it was very difficult; my working days grew longer and longer, and the demands on my time were hindering my effectiveness. Someone . . . had to be responsible for scheduling appointments, coordinating the paper flow, following up on decisions I had made. . . ."³

Circular staffing arrangements also have been criticized as stimulating unhealthy friction between staffers, who may find themselves competing for the president's attention. Most (but not all) presidents have found such jealousies disruptive to peak staff performance. But, if internal bickering is not a factor, a circular staff could easily become excessively collegial and lose its critical perspective, thus developing what is referred to as "group-think."⁴

1. What are four advantages of a pyramidal form of White House organization?
2. What are four disadvantages of a pyramidal form of White House organization?
3. What are three advantages of a circular form of White House organization?
4. What are three disadvantages of a circular form of White House organization?

²Dan Rather and Gary Paul Gates, *The Palace Guard* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 239.

³George Edwards and Stephen J. Wayne, *Presidential Leadership: Politics and Policy Making* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 203.

⁴*Ibid.*, 188.